8 Exercises to Avoid With Sciatic Pain

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Key Takeaways

Avoid high-impact activities like running, jumping, and squats if you have sciatica.
Gentle stretches and low-impact exercises can help ease sciatica pain.

If you're dealing with sciatica, avoiding certain exercises like squats and high-impact activities is crucial to prevent making your pain worse. On the flip side, gentle stretches and low-impact aerobics may help alleviate symptoms by targeting the lower back and reducing nerve compression.

Credit: Illustration by Ellen Lindner for Verywell Health

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Click Play to Learn All About Sciatica

> This video has been medically reviewed by Cara Beth Lee, MD.

Exercises to Skip With Sciatica Pain

Avoid squatting, twisting, running, jumping, or any high-impact activity if you have sciatica. Bending forward with straight legs or lifting both legs off the ground in seated or lying exercises may worsen symptoms for some.

Avoid these exercises if you have sciatic nerve pain:

1. **Bent over row:** A weightlifting exercise that strengthens muscles in the back but can stress the sciatic nerve, especially if your back is rounded
2. **Hamstring stretch:** Can cause pain if the lumbar spine isn't supported, leading to nerve compression
3. **Forward bends:** Can flex the back and compress the sciatic nerve (includes yoga poses like "downward dog")
4. **Double leg lifts:** Lifting both legs while lying down can strain the lower back and irritate the sciatic nerve
5. **Squats:** Put pressure on the lower back and legs, worsening sciatic pain

7. **Leg circles:** Can suddenly wrench hamstrings, aggravating symptoms
8. **High-impact exercise:** Puts stress on the hips and pelvis, worsening sciatica (examples include running and jumping)

> ### Sciatica
>
> Sciatica occurs when the sciatic nerve is compressed, causing pain or other symptoms in the lower back that may radiate down the leg. Symptoms often arise from narrowing of the spinal canal, which may be due to a slipped disc, bone spurs, piriformis syndrome, or a lower back injury.[1]

Is It Safe to Exercise With Sciatica?

People with sciatica generally benefit from exercise but need to take care not to overdo it. Keeping active can relieve inflammation, loosen tight muscles, and help you feel better long term.[2]

During a flare-up, light exercise and gentle stretching can ease discomfort. Some rest can help, but too much inactivity may worsen your pain.

As you start feeling better, short walks, physical therapy exercises, and staying active can help reduce pain. However, avoid over-exercising or incorrect movements, as they can aggravate the sciatic nerve.

The right level of activity and best exercises for sciatica vary by individual. Core stability, extension, and isometric exercises are often recommended. However, a 2023 study review revealed there's not enough evidence to determine the best exercises.[3]

> ### Sciatica Risk Factors
>
> The modifiable and non-modifiable risk factors for sciatica include:[4]

> Smoking
> Pregnancy
> Occupations or sports where back muscles or heavy weights are involved

Gentle Exercises to Ease Sciatica Discomfort

Gentle exercises can relieve sciatica pain and help prevent it by keeping your lower back strong and flexible.

Exercises for sciatica are similar to other training programs. They should include aerobic activities to boost endurance and strength training to activate core muscles for lower back stability.

1. Low-Impact Aerobics

Low-impact aerobic activity boosts circulation and loosens stiff muscles. Start with a 10- to 15-minute warm-up of activities like:

Swimming
Riding a stationary bike
Walking
Water exercises

It's normal to feel stiffness or slight aches in your lower back, legs, or hips at first. Muscles should relax after a few minutes. Aim to do these activities at least five times a week and gradually lengthen your sessions. If pain-free, you can do them daily.

2. Strength Training

For sciatica, strength training does not mean resistance training or weight training. Rather, it means using focused movements against gravity to build the muscles that support the spinal column.

The trick is to add activity gradually and to slow down if any pain or discomfort is felt. This approach is known as symptom-guided exercise.

the floor.

3. Pelvic Tilt

The pelvic tilt is one of the most effective ways to strengthen the muscles of the lumbar spine. It is also very safe to do, even if you are pregnant.

To do the basic pelvic tilt:

1. Lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat on the floor.
2. Place your arms alongside your torso, palms facing down.
3. Gently tilt your tailbone toward the ceiling, tightening your stomach muscles.
4. Hold for three to five seconds.
5. Lower your tailbone.
6. Repeat for a total of eight to 12 reps.

4. The Bridge

The bridge requires a bit more strength and is something you may need to ease into. If you have trouble, start with one or two only and add another rep every day.

To do the bridge:

1. Lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat on the floor.
2. Place your arms alongside your torso, palms facing down.
3. Gently lift your buttocks and back, arching your back as far as it can comfortably go.
4. Hold for several seconds.
5. Lower your buttocks and back.
6. Repeat for a total of eight to 12 reps.

5. Modified Plank

The modified plank is a holding exercise that strengthens the abdominal muscles and, in turn, the back, obliques, and pelvic floor muscles.

To do the modified plank:

Position your elbows directly under your shoulders, and keep your head and neck aligned with your spine.
Tighten your abdominal muscles.
Hold for five to 10 seconds.
Relax and return to the start position.
Repeat for a total of eight to 12 reps.

As you get stronger, you can do two or more sets of these and add other core-strengthening exercises to the routine.

> Do strengthening exercises for sciatica three to four times a week. Follow guidance from your physical therapist or other healthcare provider, as your exercise frequency will depend on your symptoms and diagnosis.

Simple Stretches to Soothe Sciatica

Sciatica often gets better on its own with time, but some stretches may help speed up the process. Gentle stretching can help loosen lower back muscles that tend to "seize" following an injury. They can also help if you've been sitting for a long period and are overweight (or are carrying extra weight during pregnancy).

There are certain rules you should follow to reap the benefits of gentle stretching for sciatica:

Always warm up with light aerobic activity before stretching.
Be careful with bending forward or rotating at the torso.
Do not force a stretch. If you feel resistance, don't push yourself.
If you feel the muscle tense up, stop, relax the muscle, then try again.
Never stretch cold muscles. If you can't do warm-up exercises, apply moist heat for 15 to 20 minutes before stretching.
If you experience pain doing a particular stretch, stop doing it.

relieve sciatica are safe for you to do.

The following stretches are commonly recommended. They are all done on the floor, lying on your back. The only equipment you would need is a belt.

1. Single Knee-to-Chest Stretch

The single knee-to-chest stretch is done on the side of the body with sciatica as well as the side of the body without.

To do the single knee-to-chest stretch:

1. Lie flat on your back.
2. Wrap your hands around one knee and gently pull to your chest as close to your chest as possible until you feel a stretch in your lower back.
3. Keep the opposite leg relaxed in a comfortable position, either with your knee bent or your leg extended.
4. Hold for 15 to 30 seconds.
5. Lower the leg and repeat on the opposite side.

2. Double Knee-to-Chest Stretch

This is a variation of the single knee-to-chest stretch. For this stretch, you need to focus on keeping your back flat on the floor.

To do the double knee-to-chest stretch:

1. Lie flat on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat on the floor.
2. Wrap your hands around both knees and gently pull to your chest as close to your chest as possible until you feel a stretch in your lower back. Do not force the stretch.
3. Keep your back flat on the floor. Avoid curling up into a ball. This helps center the stretch on the lower back muscles.
4. Hold for 15 to 30 seconds.
5. Lower your legs and relax.

3. Side-to-Side Knee Stretch

To do the side-to-side knee stretch:

1. Lie flat on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat on the floor.
2. Extend your right arm level with your shoulder.
3. Gently bring both knees to the left as far as you can go without pushing.
4. Hold for 15 to 30 seconds.
5. Return your knees to a central, neutral position.
6. Repeat with the opposite, extending your left and twisting to the right.

4. Supine Hamstring Stretch

The supine hamstring stretch activates the lower back and hamstring muscles with the aid of a belt.

To do the supine hamstring stretch:

1. Lie flat on your back.
2. Lift your right foot and wrap either a belt or towel under the arch of the foot. (The belt would need to be long enough so that you can hold the ends and keep your leg straight.)
3. Bend the left knee and rest that foot comfortably on the floor.
4. Holding both ends of the belt, gently pull and lift your right foot toward the ceiling, keeping the leg straight.
5. Keep your back flat on the floor. Avoid twisting to the side or pulling too hard. You should feel a stretch without any pain or discomfort.
6. Hold for 15 to 30 seconds.
7. Lower the leg and repeat on the opposite side.

5. Sciatic Nerve Flossing

Nerve flossing is a technique that uses a series of gentle movements to mobilize the sciatic nerve. It involves performing gentle stretches in opposite directions to pull the nerve back and forth, freeing it from compression or entrapment in the process.

Also known as nerve gliding, the simple movements help to calm nerve irritation and improve hip range of motion. There are a few different techniques for sciatic nerve flossing.

1. Sit upright in a chair with your knees shoulder width apart and feet flat on the floor.
2. Extend one leg straight, flex the foot toward the body, and tilt your head backward.
3. Next, bring your head forward and down so your chin is near your chest and point your foot.
4. Repeat this motion 10 times, then switch legs.
5. Perform this exercise two to three times a day.

When used as part of a traditional physiotherapy program, research shows nerve flossing can reduce acute sciatica pain and improve hip range of motion.[5]

6. Cobra Pose

The cobra pose from yoga practice stretches the back by arching it. A modified version may be the better option for people with sciatica or other conditions causing back pain. You can:

1. Lie prone (on your stomach) with legs together and the floor for support.
2. Put your forearms on the floor to help with stability, with elbows under your shoulders.
3. Drop your shoulder blades down your back, keeping your hips on the floor.
4. Extend the spine in an arching motion.

Hold the cobra pose for several breaths and return to the starting position, repeating the steps for the exercise pose.

7. Cat–Cow Pose

The cat-cow pose used in yoga can stretch and strengthen your back, hips, and abdominal muscles.

1. Start on your hands and knees with your chin up, your back flat, and your eyes forward.
2. Slowly arch your back up as you draw your chin towards your chest. Hold for two to five seconds.
3. Slowly bring your chin away from your chest and return your eyes forward as you arch your back down. Hold for two to five seconds.

> Yoga stretches are recommended by some professionals for treating sciatica but talk to your provider about your specific condition.[6]

Tips for Managing Sciatica

If you are experiencing symptoms of sciatica for the first time, see your healthcare provider for an evaluation and referral to physical therapy. Sciatica can take some time to resolve, but you should see an improvement within three months.[7]

The following tips can help you manage sciatica at home:

Apply ice to your lower back for 20 minutes several times a day to relieve inflammation.
For muscle stiffness, use moist heat—take a hot shower, soak in a hot tub, or use a damp heating pad.
Keep active and avoid lying down or sitting in one position for too long.
Take OTC pain relievers like Advil (ibuprofen), Aleve (naproxen), or Tylenol (acetaminophen).

Listen to your body, and if you have any questions or concerns, talk to your physical therapist or other healthcare provider.

A healthcare provider may also recommend cortisone injections or electric muscle stimulation. In some cases, surgery is needed.

Some people turn to acupuncture for sciatica, massage, trigger point therapy, and other hands-on techniques to relieve pain.

Read More: HEALTH A-Z BACK & NECK PAIN EXERCISE

7 Sources ⊕

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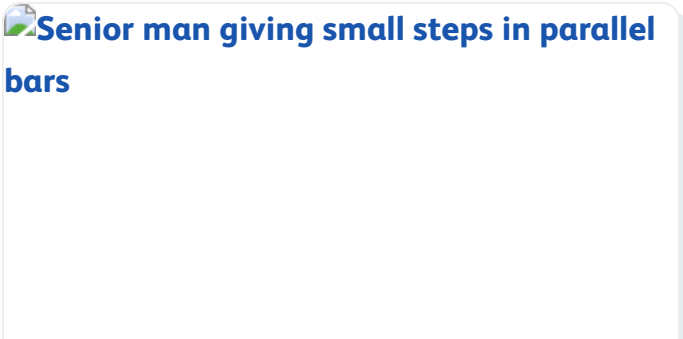

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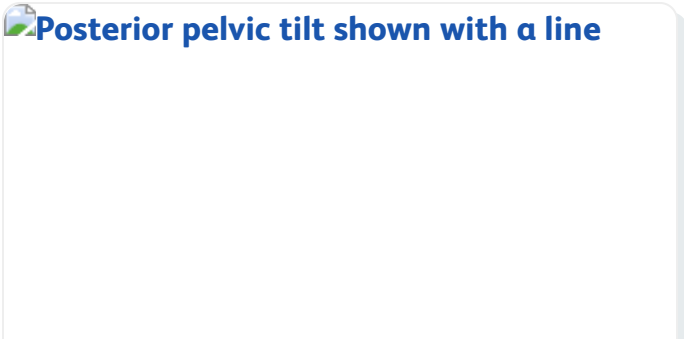

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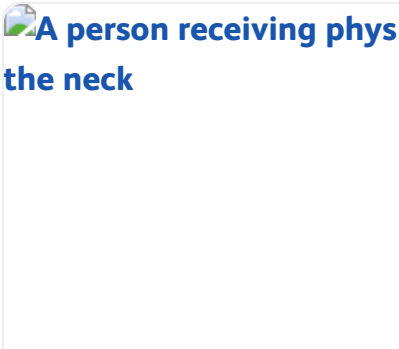

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